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Subject: Greenwire_ Industry, advocacy groups spar over IRIS as EPA meeting draws crowd

FYI

Industry, advocacy groups spar over IRIS as EPA meeting draws crowd

Jeremy P. Jacobs, E&E reporter

Published: Wednesday, November 14, 2012

U.S. EPA's first-ever fully public meeting on its program for testing chemicals for health hazards turned testy yesterday, as public-health advocates lobbed criticisms at industry groups that quickly sought to defend themselves.

At issue is EPA's Integrated Risk Information System, or IRIS, which is charged with drafting health assessments for chemicals and other environmental pollutants. IRIS's reports are the foundation of EPA and state regulations such as cleanup remediation goals and drinking water standards.

The program has long been beset by problems, but EPA is seeking to implement reforms. Part of that process was hosting a public meeting and webinar yesterday that drew more than 400 participants in person and online.

"The best way to deal with complex issues -- whether they be scientific or otherwise -- is through public dialogue and transparency," said Kenneth Olden, director of EPA's National Center for Environmental Assessment, which oversees IRIS. "We need your help. We need your advice and your support."

Public health advocates provided advice: Industry, they said, routinely undermines IRIS by seeking to delay assessments at every opportunity available. And IRIS's backlog of assessments, thought to be hundreds if not thousands of chemicals, has been repeatedly criticized by watchdogs like the Government Accountability Office.

Richard Denison of the Environmental Defense Fund said IRIS is wildly out of balance. He said industry has a financial interest in preventing IRIS assessments from being completed. Consequently, it will always be more organized when it comes to providing public comments, peer review or more data to delay finalization.

The result, Denison said, is a system that benefits industry at the expense of the public.

"IRIS has repeatedly allowed the demands for more and more data to indefinitely delay its assessments," Denison said. "We simply must stop pretending that there is a level playing field."

Denison noted that EPA has a long-held goal of finishing an assessment in 23 months, but not a single one has

met that deadline. The average complete rate has been seven-and-a-half years.

He then proposed that EPA reform IRIS to provide fewer, instead of more, opportunities for public comment -- something that flies in the face of both industry's position and EPA's proposed revisions.

"I know this playing field isn't level," said Vincent Cogliano, IRIS's acting director. "But I don't want to go backward and say we're going to shut the door and say we'll have less engagement."

David Fischer of the American Chemistry Council defended the industry. He acknowledged that EPA has made some changes ACC supports, but he said the peer review process must be improved.

EPA, he said, needs to allow "sufficient time for the public to provide input to peer reviewers ... and to allow a dialogue with peer reviewers."

Further, he emphasized that the root of ACC's concerns is for IRIS's foundation to be transparent and solid science.

"Let's make sure we get as much out of that peer review process as possible," he said. And "ensure that EPA has really taken a hard look at what the peer reviewer has articulated in their report."

That is essential, he said, to make sure "as much value of that investment in the peer review process is garnered by the agency."

But Linda Birnbaum, director of the National Institutes of Health's National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, said those remarks underscore industry's skepticism of EPA science.

"Frankly, I think when people serve on peer review panels, they usually spend a lot of time looking at information provided to them," she said. "But I think what it really shows is the complete breakdown of trust throughout this whole process."

Denison went a step farther.

"Frankly, it's [an] assault on independent government science," he said.

Formaldehyde assessment spurred critics

In a follow-up interview, Fischer said EPA's proposal to add a public meeting before a draft has begun may be viewed as another step in the process, but it shouldn't delay the assessments. Instead, it could speed them up.

"If that's considered another step, I guess it is, but it may actually tend to shorten the time frame," he said.

Denison also criticized industry for repeatedly calling for a National Academy of Sciences review of all IRIS draft assessments -- something he said would add years to the process and cost millions of dollars, and is an example of another dilatory tactic. ACC called for such a requirement last year.

Scott Jensen, a spokesman for ACC, said the group has since changed that position in light of EPA's improvements.

"I don't think anybody is calling for an NAS review of all draft assessments," he said.

EPA's IRIS program has long been criticized by public health and industry groups. But industry became extremely vocal on the issue when an NAS review of IRIS's assessment of formaldehyde, a common ingredient in household construction materials, found major problems with the program's methodologies and recommended changes last year (*Greenwire*, April 8, 2011).

The agency has since said it is implementing every one of the NAS panel's suggestions, though industry has remained concerned about the pace of those improvements (*E&ENews PM*, July 12, 2011).

In particular, ACC has argued that EPA has yet to articulate an adequate weight of evidence approach for how it selects studies and which studies it relies on more in its assessments.

"It's unclear to us how EPA has applied a weight of evidence framework in reaching its causality conclusions," Fischer said. "It is unclear to us, [and] it is something EPA needs to address."

The acrimonious public underscores that EPA's IRIS program, and its reforms, will remain a hot topic among interested stakeholders, including lawmakers on Capitol Hill.

House Republicans inserted a measure in last year's omnibus spending measure that required NAS to conduct a broad review of IRIS, which it recently began (*Greenwire*, Sept. 18).

Further, EPA's inspector general has also launched a review of IRIS, also at the behest of a Republican lawmaker (*E&E Daily*, March 9).

Perhaps because of that magnifying glass, Cogliano sought to emphasize improvements EPA has made to ensure transparency, even if they do not satisfy Denison's criteria.

"We're improving the process through early public engagement," he said. "We hope that by engaging stakeholders early, we will put all the issues on the table, we will avoid late hits, and we will [create] an outcome that everyone can respect."

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